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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the "euphemistic lexicographical technique," which is recommended for use by lexicographers for the frank recording of vulgar speech. This is a monodirectional technique to be used in bilingual dictionaries prepared for speakers of only one of the two languages. The vulgar words will not appear in the source language which is native to the user of the dictionary. On the side of the dictionary in which the source language is not the native language of the user, the vulgar words and expressions will appear as entry words and run-on expressions in alphabetical order. The target language, which on this side of the dictionary is the native language of the user, will be provided with the proper usage labels. The meaning of the source word or expression will be indicated by refined or neutral equivalents in the target language. The student of a foreign language often has little chance to learn the vulgar words by contact with native speakers and must be informed of them by means of a dictionary. Knowledge of these words is essential because the student needs to know what to avoid and how to interpret the level of speech of speakers and writers in the foreign language.
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THE LEXICOGRAPHICAL TREATMENT OF OBSCENE WORDS

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The present-day lexicographer is asked to decide what he will do about obscene words. During the past several years, monolingual dictionaries of English have been admitting words which had been deliberately omitted for generations.[1] Reviewers in even staid and long-established publications laud the inclusion of obscene words as a scholarly advance. For instance, in perhaps the longest review[2] of a dictionary ever published in the fifty-six-year history of the learned journal in question, a reviewer found that the dictionary he was reviewing was a landmark, partly because the compiler (op. cit., 516):

> "in addition to rendering three of these four [cabrón, cagar, cojón, and mear] by appropriate four-letter English words, breaks completely new ground by giving the following commonly used Spanish taboo terms (plus some derivatives and examples of familiar usage) and their corresponding English versions as well as including the English terms in the English-Spanish section..."

At the same time that this dictionary was being compiled in England, another larger Spanish and English bilingual dictionary was undergoing compilation in America[3] and its staff of eighty persons outdoes its British rival in the inclusion of obscene words. We can conclude from their example, which is only illustrative, that striving for frankness in lexicography is now an established contemporary practice.

It would be simplistic to hold that, after the pornographic cinema, le sex-shop, the "free speech" movement, and complete spellings of words for which authors two generations ago used dashes, the lexicographer finally seeks to hop on the pornographic bandwagon. In the first place, he can always claim linguistic necessity. Frank lexical treatment is no more pornographic than the treatment of anatomy in a Classical Greek statue. Secondly, he can claim a venerable history for the inclusion of obscene words. In a polyglot dictionary published in 1548 by Pasquier le Tellier of Paris, words are

supplied for intimate functions of the human body, in eight languages: Greek, Latin, Flemish, French, Spanish, Italian, English, and German. The inclusion of such words is done unselfconsciously in the little polyglot dictionaries published in the Low Countries (such as at Louvain, 1560, at Amsterdam, 1598, and at Antwerp, 1630) and in dictionaries published in England (such as William Stepney's Spanish and English bilingual vocabulary in The Spanish Schoole-master, 1591, and John Florio's Italian and English bilingual dictionary, A Worlde of Wordes, 1598. Words such as cagar, cojones, and mear are by no means absent from an important dictionary published in 1705 and 1706 by Captain John Stevens, A New Spanish and English Dictionary. But by the end of the seventeenth century, monolingual dictionaries were eliminating words which shocked the sensibilities of the user. The Dictionary of the French Academy (1694) eliminates almost completely the "termes d'emportement qui blessent la pudeur". In the nineteenth century, the table no longer has legs, only limbs, and the same Greek statues mentioned above as models of chasteness are fitted out with panties to hide their "shame". Between the Ulysses of Alfred Lord Tennyson and the Ulysses of James Joyce, the lexicographical treatment of certain obscene words was unthinkable. But finally, as noted by Georges Matoré,[4] obscene words which would have been banned in refined circles in the nineteenth century were used by those same social circles in the twentieth century.

Obscenity may be as hard to define as religion is but it is nevertheless amenable to classification. There is what we might call a level of obsceneness:

FRENCH	LEVEL OF OBSCENENESS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
coquine	archaic and humorous	hussy
fille	relatively inoffensive	tart
salope	offensive	slut
putain	very offensive	whore

The level of obsceneness and the level of speech are not the same. Only the accidents of history and the development of civilization make possible in certain periods the confusion of obscenity with slang, jargon, and substandard speech. The following pejorative words range from the innocuous to the obscene:

FRENCH	LEVEL OF OBSCENENESS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
coquin	archaic and humorous	rogue
type	relatively inoffensive	fellow, character
cochon	offensive	skunk
salaud	very offensive	son of a (gun) [or stronger]

The difference between profanity and obscenity is nebulous. An oath may be obscene and some people would consider obscenity by its nature to be profane because of its irreverence for life, Nature, God, or hallowed principles. It yields to our classification of level of obsceneness:

FRENCH	LEVEL OF OBSCENENESS	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
sapristi!	archaic and humorous	zounds!
mon Dieu!	relatively inoffensive	gracious me!
merde!	offensive	damn it!
nom de Dieu!	very offensive	[untranslated in this listing]

How broad is the category we call "obscenity"? A well-known columnist recently labeled as "obscene" the theft of two diamond rings from a corpse in a Chicago morgue. Is murder obscene? Are those words obscene which graphically describe torture and violent death? But the thing must not be confused with the word. There are recognized Biblical words which label obscene sins but by that token the Biblical word itself is not obscene. And there are certainly also obscene words for good things—the natural functions of the body, for instance, which in the philosophical view held by many of our contemporaries are no longer held to be shameful. There is a great variety of obscenity and this variousness will have something to do with the lexicographical treatment, as shown by the following subjects to be discussed in this paper:

A) Geography. The word is obscene in one region but not in another.

B) Bilingual equivalence. Cognates differ in level of obscenity from one language to another.

C) History. 1) The word has been consistently obscene.
2) The word once was not obscene but is now.
3) The word once was obscene but now is less so.

D) Meaning. The word is obscene only in some meanings.

E) Word formation. Derived forms of an obscene word are not necessarily obscene.

F) Special monolingual lexicographical problems. Problems of the bilingual and polyglot are sometimes encountered in monolingual lexicography.

G) Reasons for studying obscenity. One can think of facetious and serious reasons for a student to study it.

H) Euphemistic lexicographical technique. A tour de force and a pis-aller.

A. Geography

The word is obscene in one region but not in another. Speakers in Mexico must find a substitute for even such an important word as madre ("mother") because of its obscene meaning there. A symphony visiting Santiago had to reprint its programs listing the musical composition El Sombrero de tres picos ("The Three-cornered Hat") by Manuel de Falla because pico ("beak; corner; peak;" etc.) is obscene in Chile. In Argentina and Uruguay, coger ("to seize") refers to engaging in sexual intercourse. Here is a suggested lexicographical handling of this problem:

> concha f shell; ...; (vulgar) In Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay this word means "female organ" and in those countries it is to be avoided in general.
>
> Fanny ['fæni] s Paquita ‖ fanny s (slang) nalgas; (vulgar) Esta palabra significa en Inglaterra "órgano sexual femenino" y por lo tanto se debe de evitar su uso en general.

The above treatment is bidirectional. The question might be raised: should not the metalanguage be set in both Spanish and English instead of in one or the other? Will not many Spanish speakers need the explanation of obscene concha and will not many American speakers need the explanation of obscene fanny?[5] They might need it because of the unfamiliarity on the part of the speakers with the obscenity in their own language or in different regions where their language is spoken and because one cannot count on the monolingual dictionaries including that obscenity. If so, then the explanation s.v. concha should also be in Spanish even though many

Spanish-speaking users presumably might be able to read English well enough to understand the explanation as it stands above, and the explanation s.v. fanny should also be in English even though some English-speaking users presumably might be able to read Spanish.

B. Bilingual equivalents

Cognates differ in level of obscenity from one language to another. Although the English cognate of the French verb pisser is not as obscene as some of the Anglo-Saxon four-letter words, it can be argued that it is much more vulgar than its French cognate, as shown by the absence of the English cognate in the following treatment:

> pisser [pise] tr (colloquial) to spout (water); (colloquial) to leak; (slang) to pass (e.g., blood); pisser de la copie (slang) to be a hack writer ‖ intr (slang) to take a leak

The intransitive English equivalent above is offered not as a euphemism but as an attempt to match the level of obsceneness of the French.

What is said of pisser above may in some measure hold true with foutre, chier, merde, and many of the French obscene words, i.e., that they are not as strong as the glossing with the notorious Anglo-Saxon four-letter word would make them appear to be. In reality, no word in one language has an exact translation in another language. This stems not only from a difference of cultures but from a difference in linguistic stock. Note the affective specialization of certain Anglo-Saxon words in English made possible by the split lexical personality of English: Germanic/Latin.

C. History

1) The word has been consistently obscene:

cacare > chier

Of course, even over a period of many years a word may not change in meaning enough for a difference in lexicographical recording but may change in meaning enough to make a difference in the affective responses elicited by it. In one sense,

language changes a little bit from one day to the next because of the inevitable new frame of reference which each passing day of experience brings into life and language.

2) The word once was not obscene but is now. Although the level of the French noun, baiser ("kiss"), has remained stable, the level of obsceneness of the verb, baiser, has sunk during the past hundred years or more. This decline can be proved by looking up the word in old dictionaries. (Or by noting the treatment of the word in new dictionaries which thoughtlessly copy the old dictionaries.) It is true that the Robert[6] still lists: baiser au front and baiser le crucifix and both the Robert and the Petit Larousse list: baiser la main d'une dame. If the particular part of the anatomy is specified or if the object is specified, these dictionaries would allow this restricted use of the verb. But not all native speakers of polite French will now allow even this, and perhaps, because of lexicographical lag, even the best dictionaries are wrong at this point. Today, the lexicographer can begin his gloss with the obscene meaning of the verb, as follows:

tr (vulgar) to have sex with

and then can append the historical meaning so that the user may have the means of translating the older texts:

...; (archaic) to kiss

3) The word once was obscene but it has (at least in part) lost that obscenity (at least in some uses), as for example:

foutre [futr] tr ...; foutez-moi la paix! (vulgar) leave me alone!; il est foutu! (vulgar) he's a goner! ◊ ref...; je m'en fous! (vulgar) I don't care!

Vulgar as this word is—and euphemisms such as je m'en fiche! ("I don't care!") are current—its level of obsceneness has taken on some variation, as shown by the run-ons in the treatment above. (Of course, the word is very vulgar; mention is made here only of slight variation.)

D. Meaning

The word is obscene only in some meanings. We have seen in the discussion above that baiser is polite as a noun but extremely vulgar as a verb. The development of:

filia > fille

is also complex. There has been no problem of respectability down through the centuries with the meanings of "daughter" and "servant". But in centuries past, fille used to mean "girl". Increasingly since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the adjective jeune ("young") forms a necessary element of the word when the meaning is "girl": jeune fille, which does not mean "young girl". Today, "young girl" might be rendered by petite fille or by fillette. In Old French and Middle French, fillette sometimes had the meaning of "prostitute" but now fille has taken on that meaning. It will be noted by a look at the level-of-obsceneness listing of four words for the female sex listed earlier in this paper, that the level of obsceneness is not as offensive for fille as it is for many words.[7]

E. Word formation

Derived forms of an obscene word are not necessarily obscene or as obscene as the parent word. Thus, chier retains in modern French the exceptional vulgarity which cacare had in Roman times but its derivative chienlit is not by any means on as offensive a level. Perhaps popular etymology confuses the element "chien" with "dog" rather than with the disgusting original meaning, chie-en-lit ("defecate in bed") and therefore we find it without any "(vulgar)" label needed:

chienlit m carnival mask; masquerade, fantastic costume

But in the sense of a "person who soils his bed", a "(vulgar)" label might well be affixed. Of course, if we are to believe the Mansion's Dictionary, which so many people consider authoritative, we find in its recent revision and resetting of 1972, a colloquial label ("F" for familier). The compilers of the revised Mansion's think that chienlit (masculine or feminine), a "bedwetter", a "bedmesser", a slob, or a person who goes around with a dirty shirttail hanging out, is a perfectly acceptable French word for informal conversation, with no need to warn the user of obscenity.

There is still another meaning of chienlit. The same afternoon that General de Gaulle arrived at Orly airport during the worker-student strike of 1968, he was reported to have said to his inner Cabinet:[8] "Réforme, oui; chienlit, non!" Yes to reform but no to immature, irresponsible rowdyism. It is certainly not polite French but it was used by le grand Charles and in a remark meant for the same public which had voted for him in numerous referendums.

Here are some other forms derived from obscene words. They can be used without apology in polite language:

cul-blanc	(ornithology) whitetail, wheatear
cul-de-jatte	legless person
cul-de-sac	dead end
pet-de-loup	absent-minded professor
pet-de-nonne	fritter
pet-en-l'air	short jacket

All of these derived words are surprising to an English speaker who is shocked if he tries substituting an Anglo-Saxon three-letter word for cul and an Anglo-Saxon four-letter word for pet. In some cases the meaning is downright humorous: a short jacket rather than a long one so that there is no obstacle to breaking wind. None of these words needs a label in their lexicographical treatment nor does pétard when used to mean "firecracker". But pétard does need a label when it means "hind end" and that meaning and the suggestive root pet is probably responsible for a sly smile on the French listener's face when this word is used.

F. Special Monolingual Lexicographical Problems

Most of the lexicographical treatment discussed so far has been applied to bilingual dictionaries. And bilingual problems crop up even when discussing monolingual dictionaries. It is possible to treat different variants of the same language so that the dictionary partakes of the nature of the bilingual. Thus Norman W. Schur in his British Self-Taught: with Comments in American (New York: Macmillan, 1973) treats 3000 British words and seeks to give American equivalents as well as definitions, as for example:

BRITISH	AMERICAN
vest	undershirt

What might seem to be a one-language dictionary turns out to be a bilingual one. It might also be commented that a dictionary in which British English and American English are to be set in contrast to another language with many regionalisms is called "bilingual" but in some respects it resembles a polyglot dictionary.

In a more complex treatment of the variants of one language, Alphonse Boudard and Luc Etienne in their L'Argot sans peine, la Méthode à Mimile ("Slang without toil, the Mimic-ASSiMiL Method") provide a glossary masquerading as an elementary grammar with dialogues, illustrations, exercises, and notes. Published in 1970 by the publishing house, La Jeune Parque, in Paris, it strives to emulate the famous ASSiMiL language lessons. The effect of the book is hilarious in the contrast between the language of the pègre (the French underworld of gangsters, criminals, and immoralists) set on one page with sentences carefully numbered by which they can be compared on the facing page with an impeccably respectable and even précieux translation into standard literary French. Thus on p. 218 is the heading éducation anglaise and on p. 219 its translation into standard French plaisirs masochistes ("masochistic pleasures"). The expression is a curious commentary on the reputation of English ("anglaise") culture in the Parisian underworld. Here is a confrontation from pp. 48-49:

language of the pègre	literary French
LA GONZESSE	LA FEMME
1. Jactons d'entrée des roberts!	1. Parlons pour commencer des seins!
2. Une frangine qu'a en guise de laiterie	2. Une personne du sexe qui possède pour toute poitrine
3. des œufs sur le plat ou des blagues à tabac	3. des appas trop plats ou des charmes tombants

One notes that gonzesse and frangine are slang for "woman". For seins ("breasts") one notes the following: a) roberts a trademark since 1888 of a nursing bottle; b) des œufs sur le plat "fried eggs"; c) des blagues à tabac "tobacco pouches".

Some of my Parisian acquaintances confirmed the accuracy of this language—they had met persons who "spoke that way". On a return flight, I showed the book to one fellow passenger, a young Parisian en route to his studies at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and he declared that it contained perfectly normal modern colloquial French. (Some informants tell me that he was pulling my leg.)

G. Reasons for studying obscenity

With tongue in cheek, Boudard & Etienne suggest (op. cit., p. 12) several reasons for learning the obscene and slang words contained in their "lessons": help in finding bad companions, greater efficiency in pursuing criminal activity, ability to feel at home when sent to prison, and understanding dialogue and passages in modern plays, novels, radio & television programs, and theatrical events. They might have included training of spies and saboteurs among their facetious reasons. Their last reason is worthy, that of understanding modern literature. One might add these situations, in all seriousness: 1) the author who wishes to write authentic dialogue; 2) the traveler who wishes to identify the personality of the stranger he meets; 3) the student who wants to avoid inadvertent obscenity by means of the ability to identify such speech.

Let us discuss this last reason. In his use of the language he is learning, the student may wish to avoid all ambiguous and suggestive words but if he has not been forewarned by a knowledge of what to avoid, he may use the wrong word, e.g., fille in the wrong context. This learning is particularly vital for the student who has acquired a good accent and who is therefore expected to pick the correct word: any grossness or indelicacy on his part seems deliberate because it is uttered in a native-like accent. Paradoxically then, this goal of learning obscene words in order to avoid them meets the requirements of the goal of refinement in speech of the Victorians and of Anthony Comstock. Thus when the teacher writes an indecent target-language word on the blackboard in the attempt to raise the level of sophistication of his language class, the sweet little girl who objects to him teaching her "dirty French" or "dirty Spanish" must be informed that the goal is to avoid such words, not to use them.

The objection may be voiced that this formal training in obscene words is not necessary because native speakers have the most trouble avoiding bad words, not learning them. Here it must be pointed out that the osmosis by which all kinds of information is imparted to the native speaker growing up in and surrounded by his own native tongue, does not work as well for the learner, who is usually a stranger in the country where the target language is spoken. Thirty years ago I received a letter from an American friend in Paris with a

report that there were "no dirty words in the French language except cochon, which can be used in kidding friends". His experience is significant in that he stayed away from American tourists and was entertained as a house guest in the home of native French families speaking French. Yet, he did not learn what constitutes a sizable part of the lexicon of any language. It sometimes takes many years to find a frank informant—prove it by asking a newly found French friend the function of the bidet. Many a benighted traveler has ended up using it only for washing his feet or his socks.

H. Euphemistic lexicographical technique

Perhaps monodirectionalism is needed in a situation in which offense is to be avoided. The student does not want to learn how to write and speak obscene French; he wants to learn to recognize the obscene words in reading and listening. By means of euphemistic monodirectional glosses or, if you will, by a prudish rendering of the meaning in the language of the user, a dictionary may be written for the general public, for schools, and for the family in a way that the presence of obscene words will not be thought of as corrupting and offensive. The obscene word is entered in the word list, labeled with a label such as "(vulgar)", and glossed with equivalents, paraphrases, or definitions set on a polite, scientific, or neutral level in the native language of the learner. Examples of this practice may be found throughout this paper. Here is another example:

chier [ʃje] intr (vulgar) to evacuate the bowels;...

This tour de force or pis-aller might also be tried even in a bidirectional dictionary. (See the treatment of concha and fanny above.) Offensive words in one's native language could still be found by the curious but such a person would be forced to run through the entire word list.

Conclusion

The best lexicography, of course, and the most scholarly lexicography is the giving of obscene equivalents for obscene entry words with the addition of definitions and elaborations when necessary. This applies to bilingual lexicography, of course. For monolingual lexicography, definitions and etymologies may be polite but frank. In both bilingual and monolingual lexicography a complete word list is desirable without arbitrary gaps and omissions. The work will be of

value to the future lexicographer, the lexicologist, the phonetician, the philologist, the researcher in historical and in descriptive linguistics, the literary and the cultural historian, the sociologist, and the anchropologist. In performing this task the lexicographer must be sustained by scholarly dedication and a thick skin—for, as Josette Rey-Debove[9] has pointed out, in the same way that an actor who plays the part of the villain is hissed off the stage, a large section of the public will accuse the lexicographer of using the obscene word in his own speech even though he seeks only to record it correctly. Our parting word to the lexicographer might be: "Soyez sage! Du courage!"

FOOTNOTES

[1] The change during the past forty years is well stated by Allen Walker Read in a paper given before the conference, "Perspectives on Language" at the University of Louisville, May 7, 1976. Read begins his paper as follows:

> "In December of 1934, more than four decades ago, while I was still in my twenties, I published an article dealing with what I called 'the most disreputable of all English words—the colloquial verb and noun, universally known by speakers of English, designating the sex act.' ["An Obscenity Symbol", American Speech 9, 4(Dec. 1934), 264-278.] There was a certain boldness, or even bravery, in treating that subject at all, in view of the climate of that time; but my boldness did not extend to mentioning the word outright even once in the fifteen pages of the article.
>
> "The change of ethos during those four decades is well indicated by my freedom to use the word in the course of the present paper. I may say that my own personal inhibitions have not been much affected, for the word is still not in my active vocabulary; but that is a matter of my personal choice. I must have the freedom not to use the word if I so choose. I should like to express my praise for the boldness of the late Professor Cabell Greet, who was willing to print my paper at that time."

An important part of Read's 1934 article is devoted to the lexicographical treatment of obscene words.

[2] Colin Smith, Collins Spanish-English/English-Spanish Dictionary (N.Y.: Collins, 1971), reviewed by Brian Steel in Hispania 56(May 1973), 511-521.

[3] Tana de Gámez, et al., Simon and Schuster's International Dictionary English/Spanish Spanish/English (N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

[4] Histoire des dictionnaires français (Paris: Larousse, 1968), p. 217: "Il faut pourtant attendre le XX^{e} siècle pour voir se répandre des mots grossiers dans des milieux où il eût été déshonorant, auparavant, de les employer."

[5] Thomas Pyles reports in American Speech 48, 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1973), 116, that fanny seems to be losing its vulgarity in Britain:

> "Fanny is no longer so shocking in British English as Schur supposes: the innocuous bisexual meaning, probably of American origin, is the only one recorded in the OED Supplement...".

Pyles was reviewing the British Self-Taught by Norman W. Schur (vide infra, part F).

[6] Paul Robert, Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française, les mots et les associations d'idées, 6 vol. (Paris: Société du Nouveau Littré, 1964). In 1967, the same publishers offered a one-volume edition of the work, Le Petit Robert, compiled by Alain Rey, H. Cottez, and Josette Rey-Debove.

[7] I have a collection of a hundred French words for woman of ill repute. They include:

fille commune	fille de vie
fille d'amour	fille en carte
fille de joie	fille facile
fille de mauvaise vie	fille folle
fille de moeurs dissolues	fille galante
fille de moeurs faciles	fille perdue
fille de moeurs légères	fille publique
fille de rien	fille soumise
fille des rues	fille vénale

[8] One of my French informants reports that de Gaulle actually uttered these words over the French radio and television.

[9] Etude linguistique et sémiotique des dictionnaires français contemporains (The Hague & Paris: Mouton, 1971), p. 107: "Bien que le lexicographe ne fasse que mentionner les termes existants, il est jugé comme s'il les employait, tel l'acteur conspué pour avoir joué le rôle du traître."